

Archive Alexandre de Humboldt Montréal

Fabiano Kueva

curator Emmanuelle Choquette

November 11 – December 16, 2023

The exhibition *Archive Alexandre de Humboldt Montréal* is part of a decade-long project by artist Fabiano Kueva: a wandering examination and geo-poetical interpretation of German explorer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt's expeditions to America in late 18th and early 19th centuries. Under the aegis of a fictional institution, *Archivo Alexander von Humboldt*, Kueva becomes a trustee of all the elements generated by the project: artifacts, botanical, mineralogical, and zoological specimens, facsimiles, journals, photographs, drawings, and film. Over the years, he has built a vast archive by appropriating the strategies of 19th century scientific explorers, such as walking, mapping, journaling, writing letters, and collecting natural and cultural specimens. Based on Humboldt's travels, between 1799 and 1804, across the regions now known as Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, Cuba, and part of the United States, Kueva re-enacts this journey through performances that become the subject of a film titled *Ensayo Geopoético*. In the film, he plays a highly anachronistic fictional character, a quasi-Humboldt, who represents both the imperialistic gaze and the observed subaltern subject. This figure moves through landscapes that have since been colonized by the modern project; he examines artifacts in an ethnological museum or strolls among a crowd of tourists at the base of the pyramids in Teotihuacan, Mexico.

Distancing himself from the logic of homage,¹ Kueva emphasizes this paradox and accentuates the ever-ambiguous character of Humboldt's figure. Through the position he takes in all facets of his project, the artist succeeds in integrating the principle of alterity into one body and creating different points of view simultaneously. The use of his body in the film allows him to situate the gaze of the observer and that of the observed, deconstructing the colonial principle of a neutral, floating, ubiquitous, and non-situated gaze. This notion of the epistemic non-place has greatly contributed to the coloniality of visual knowledge (Barriendos, 2011), itself supported by the modern construction of a Eurocentric world power (Quijano, 2000).

Modern ethnographic and historical museums are founded on the distinctions between observer/observed, dominant/dominated, and object of study/object of desire, which participate in the construction of the tropical myth. The aestheticization, even fetishization, of certain objects and natural specimens contribute to a vision that divides the world in two and that represents the tropical landscape as a natural paradise to be conquered and whose fruit must be collected. Kueva appropriates these strategies, yet as part of a game of discrepancies and interferences. In the collection he presents, actual specimens or artifacts stand alongside reproductions or facsimiles and are all part of a fiction. The heterogeneity of the collection makes us consider how the acts of collecting and displaying exhibitions in museums have the power to remove all doubt as to the authenticity of objects and the veracity of the narratives around them. In addition, the museum reserve recreated at OBORO evokes other typically invisible systems of selecting and attributing value to objects. The mechanisms of power and authority governing the choices of what is and what is not shown are put into play here.

1. In 2011, at the start of his project, the Berlin Palace museum, now called the Humboldt Forum, was built in Berlin. In 2019, the 250th anniversary of Humboldt's birth was celebrated throughout Europe, United States, and Latin America.

The chapter *Todas las plantas del mundo*—a fragment from *Ensayo Geopoético*—presented in the exhibition underlines the stark contrast between European and Latin American museums. In this part of the film, the character strolls through two botanical gardens, one in France and the other in Peru. The first is emblematic of a modern vision of the museum, in which the order of things is well defined, the archives are kept securely, and access is limited. The second garden is dedicated to medicinal plants and welcomes the public through a modest entrance. The labels identifying the plants are efficient though without artifice. Nonetheless, this garden contains plants that have some of the most powerful medicinal properties in the world.² Several species are used in the production of pharmaceutical products, making them natural resources exploited by large-scale industry. This comparison cannot but evoke the extractive thinking that enabled the founding of the first western museums and that continues to govern markets and international political relations. Yet this video chapter also puts forward the vast popular botanical knowledge, illustrated by a walk through a public market in Lima. Here we see large quantities of grains and fresh or dried plants alongside useful objects and food in the context of daily life. The traditional knowledge of plants is integrated into the social fabric, without being placed in a hierarchical relationship with modern scientific knowledge. After the scene in the market, we watch a *brujo* carry out a cleansing ritual with nettles. Just as a shaman demonstrates the traditional knowledge of plants in mountains or forests, the *brujo* constitutes an urban version of this figure, bringing their knowledge to the city and community.

Kueva's project is in line with the work of other artists who appropriate methods developed by European explorers during their voyages to Latin America in the 18th and 19th centuries, such as cabinets of curiosities, atlases, bestiaries, as well as botanical, mineral, and other types of collections. The contemporary rereading of these methodologies through art provides a critical distance and allows us to reflect on

2. Curare, coca, and caapi, among others.

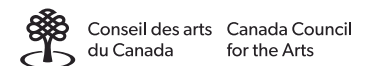
more inclusive and less anthropocentric practices that are based on a fluid exchange between disciplines and sources of knowledge (Page, 2023). The exhibition *Archive Alexandre de Humboldt Montréal* helps us to consider new ways of valorizing popular and traditional knowledge in collections and museums outside of market forces and hegemonic regimes of truth.

—Emmanuelle Choquette

Translation: Oana Avasilichioaei

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